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A LOCAL DICK TURPIN

BY 'BEORCHAM'

ROBERT SNOOKS

—Highwayman

Just off the main road between Bourne End and Boxmoor, two small stones mark the grave of Robert Snooks, a highwayman. He was hanged and buried near the scene of his last crime, and a century and a half later his name is still known to thousands of people in the neighbourhood. Great-great-grandfather told thrilling tales of his wicked deeds and gruesome stories of his execution, but with the passing of time Snooks is no longer the district's champion bogey man, and no longer is anyone afraid to pass near his grave at night. A short time ago, when I climbed over the fence to see if the gravestone inscription was still visible, someone—probably a child—had left a posy of wild flowers on the grave.

Worked at the King's Arms ?

Little is known of Robert Snooks' early life. He was a native of Hungerford, and legend has it that for a time he worked at the King's Arms, Berkhamsted, perhaps as an ostler. If that was so, his employer, John Page, was destined to meet him in an official capacity on the day of his death, for the King's Arms landlord was also postmaster and high constable for the Dacorum Hundred.

Robert Snooks was certainly not without local knowledge. He knew that the mails between Tring and Hemel Hempstead were carried by a postboy on horseback, and he knew, too, that on a certain night banknotes of considerable value would be in the mailbags.

The postboy, John Stevens, was jogging along the main road on his mare when he was challenged by Snooks, who, flourishing a pistol, ordered him to "Stand and deliver." Stevens meekly obeyed. Snooks rifled the mailbags, helped himself to the valuable contents

—one letter alone contained £500—and galloped away.

Snooks was miles away before some labourers, employed by a farmer named Pope, found the rifled mailbags. Information was immediately sent to John Page, of the King's Arms, who mounted his horse and galloped to London. There, at the General Post Office, he delivered the rifled mailbags to Mr. (afterwards Sir) Francis Freeling, and for a time the authorities were without a single clue as to the identity of the robber.

Meanwhile, Snooks found lodgings in Southwark, where he managed to get rid of some of the smaller banknotes. Then he made what was literally a fatal mistake. He sent a servant girl to purchase some cloth, and asked her to bring back the change from a £5 note. But it was a £50 note! Snooks deemed it advisable to decamp instantly. It was soon discovered that the £50 note had been abstracted from the Boxmoor mailbags, a hue and cry was raised for Snooks, and a substantial reward (said to be £300) was offered for information that would lead to his arrest.

Trial at Hertford

Snooks made his way to Hungerford, where, according to one report, he was eventually recognised by a postboy who had formerly been his schoolfellow. He was arrested by Bow-street runners, and sent to Hertford for trial.

From a report of the hearing in the *London Chronicle* of March, 1802, we learn that Snooks was indicted in the Christian name of "John" (the gravestone inscription states "Robert Snooks.") Before Mr. Justice Heath, he was charged with feloniously assaulting John Stevens on the King's Highway, putting him in fear of his life, and taking from him the letter-bags. Owing to the darkness on the night of the crime, Stevens was unable to identify his assailant with any certainty, and the court had to rely upon purely circumstantial evidence.

"Destructive to Society"

It was, however, proved that Snooks had been previously in the neighbourhood "cobbling" the girths of his saddle, which had been broken, and the saddle was produced to show where the botching had been done. Evidence was also given as to some of the stolen notes being put into circulation, and it was stated that Snooks was known to be a man of no "visible means" of livelihood, and that he carried firearms. Without hesitation, the jury found him guilty.

Mr. Justice Heath said that there would be no security for the lives of His Majesty's good subjects if the midnight

depredator was sure of escaping justice. The crime was so destructive to society and the commercial interest of the country that Snooks must not flatter himself with a thought of pardon. He was sentenced to death.

Instructions were given to Mr. Page to select a place for his execution, as near as possible to the scene of the crime. It was intended that he should be hung in chains, but this was petitioned against by Boxmoor residents. Incidentally, some reports state that Snooks was hanged at Hertford and removed to Boxmoor for burial, but it is generally agreed that he was executed at Boxmoor.

A Morbid Holiday

Nash's "Reminiscences of Berkhamsted" tells us that thousands of people from Berkhamsted and neighbouring towns and villages made a morbid holiday of the execution on March 11, 1802. Legend has it that when the post-chaise conveying Snooks to the place of execution stopped outside a nearby public-house for his custodians to take refreshment, Snooks shouted to the crowd: "It's no good hurrying—they can't start the fun until I get there."

Another picturesque report speaks of Snooks being "launched into eternity." He met his death bravely, and silence fell upon the vast crowd. But a disgraceful scene followed when the hangman insisted that he was entitled to Snooks' clothes, and Mr. Page was obliged to intervene.

Mr. Page also appealed to the crowd to provide a coffin, but as no offer was forthcoming the body was placed in a shallow grave. On the following day, however, a number of people subscribed to purchase a coffin, and Snooks was buried for the second time. Gravestones were provided many years later by the Boxmoor Trustees.

No Violence

For a final glimpse of Snooks, let us turn to "Railroadiana," a book published in 1838:—

"Snooks had previously been a bad character and had committed several highway robberies. He once attempted to stop a Mr. Laker and was said to have fired a pistol at him, but the intended victim escaped unhurt. At the place of execution, when about to be turned off, he adverted to this charge and admitted his guilt so far as the intent to rob went, but denied that he had contemplated murder or intended doing Mr. Laker any bodily injury. At the moment he checked his horse for the purpose of approaching Mr. Laker, the animal reared, and in taking the pistol from his pocket it went off by accident. Snooks' general conduct caused his statement to obtain belief as, however desperate his unlawful enterprises, he was not known in any case to have used unnecessary violence. When he committed the offence for which his life was forfeited, he did not in any way ill-treat the bearer of the mailbags, but only compelled him to go to a place convenient for the perpetration of the robbery he meditated."

Medicine and Food

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening and Sunday morning service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

- November 30—December 6: Boots.
- December 7—13: Figg.
- December 14—20: Dickman.
- December 21—27: Taylors.
- December 28—Jan. 3: Boots.

FOOD OFFICE

The Food Office, in the Town Hall, is open on four weekdays as follows:—

- Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 to 5 p.m.
- Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 12 noon.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:

- Monday and Friday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.; 5.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
- Wednesday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 5 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.
- Thursday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.
- Saturday—10 a.m. to 1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.

A notable success was achieved by the swimming section of the Berkhamsted and District Schools' Sports Association, when they defeated the Luton Schools' Sports Association by 106½ pts. to 81½.

The match took place in the splendid swimming pool of the Ashlyns School.

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